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Between disruptions and connections: “new” EU migrants in the UK before and after the Brexit

Aija Lulle^{*1}, Russell King², Veronika Dvorakova² and Aleksandra Szkudlarek³

¹ Loughborough University, UK aija.lulle@gmail.com

² University of Sussex, UK r.king@sussex.ac.uk; vd54@sussex.ac.uk

³ University of Warsaw, Poland olla.sz@op.pl

Abstract

This paper examines the pre- and post-Brexit experiences and perspectives of migrants from three “new” EU countries – Latvia, Poland and Slovakia – who are living and working or studying in the London area. Deploying the key-concepts of power-geometry and relational space, the analysis explores the way that Brexit impacted the migrants’ connections to the UK “bounded space” and their ongoing mobility behaviour and plans. Empirical evidence comes from 35 in-depth interviews with migrants, most of whom were interviewed both before and after the referendum of 23 June 2016. We find that migrants are unequally positioned socio-spatially to deal with the new power-geometries resulting from Brexit, and we detect diverging trajectories between the more highly-skilled and high-achieving EU citizens and the more disadvantaged low-skilled labour migrants. First, we probe the uncertainties brought about by juridical status, related to the length of stay in Britain. Second, we explore personal and professional connections and disruptions. Third, we question how the power-geometries of time, juridical status and personal/professional connections/disruptions shape future mobility plans.

KEYWORDS: power-geometry, relational space, Brexit, London region, migrants from “new” EU countries

1. INTRODUCTION

Immediately after the EU Referendum, on the morning of 24 June 2016, speculations, fears and uncertainties emerged: who would qualify to remain, who would be “forced” to leave, who will want to leave the UK? Brexit poses many questions to population geographers. But

they all are grounded in the chasm between “bounded” and “relational” space; between territory defined by borders and regimes of migration control, and space as constructed through social relations and fluid, contested boundaries. Furthermore, these judicial, migration management-inflicted questions invite us to step back and uncover deeper historical relations between the notions of “settled” status versus mobile migrants, between “old” and “new” migrants and the politicisation of certain types of newcomers. In an infamous quote prior the UK’s general election in 2015, Nigel Farage, then leader of the UKIP party and the key figure in stirring anti-immigrant sentiments during the “Leave” campaign, moulded colonial and post-socialist migration contexts in the UK’s history of making migrants as follows:

I have to confess I do have a slight preference: I do think, naturally, that people from India and Australia are in some ways more likely to speak English, understand common law and have a connection with this country than some people that come perhaps from countries that haven’t fully recovered from being behind the Iron Curtain (Mason, 2015).

The people who came to the UK from countries which once were behind the “Iron Curtain” are at the heart of our inquiry. Most of our research participants arrived through the free movement of labour regime within the EU. However, the Leave campaign built its electoral traction through portraying the influx of migrants from the new EU member-states as “uncontrollable” and a “threat”. The immediate aftermath of Brexit evoked not only uncertainty-related anxiety but also references to the erection of borders, deportations (Stone, 2017), and a spike in racist and xenophobic incidents (Bulman, 2017). These sensitivities were personally unknown to many our interviewees in their pre-Brexit lives in Britain, but were still alive in the collective, “haunted” memory of socialist regimes (Etkind, 2009).

Our focus in this paper is on people themselves and on the geographically unequal power relations or “power-geometry” (Massey, 1993), within which they found themselves before and after the referendum. Our aim is to unpack the subjectivities that nuance notions of “bounded” space and “stable” residence versus “belonging in mobility” and in “relational” spaces which are always, as Massey (2005, p. 8) insisted, socially created and “under construction”. We achieve this broad objective by probing deeper into three interrelated questions:

1. How does timing and length of stay in the UK matter in claiming “stable” attachments to a place?
2. How do personal connections and disruptions matter in migrants’ evolving plans to remain in the UK or move elsewhere?
3. And, linking the above two questions together, how do time spent in the UK, personal relations, and the sense of originating from the “new” post-socialist member-countries, influence migrants’ future trajectories in the light of the referendum result?

The paper unfolds as follows. We begin by exploring and theorising the relations that our participants have to the UK. Then we provide a concise description of our methods and the key characteristics of the research participants. The empirics of the paper consist of three sections, in turn presenting research findings related to time, personal connections, and migrant trajectories. Finally, we bring our findings together in terms of how relationality and power-geometries shape “new” intra-EU mobilities in “Brexit Britain”.

2. THEORISING BETWEEN-NESS: DISRUPTIONS AND CONNECTIONS

In our ongoing research on new youth mobilities in Europe, young European migrants spoke about their sense of rejection, their new-found fear of speaking in accented English, and their anger and resignation about rising intolerance towards them before and especially after the EU Referendum (Lulle, Moroşanu, & King, 2018). Most of the pre- and post-referendum politicised campaigns and media events were “out there” and about “them” – in other words, with little recognition of the migrant subjectivities that shape people’s own understanding of place and belonging.

We unpack the complexity of migrant subjectivities via the theoretical rigour and depth of two key concepts of Doreen Massey. The first is “power-geometry” (1993). People are unequally positioned, and experience dissimilar effects, due to the ongoing uncertainties surrounding Brexit. Such positioning is personal, political and socio-spatial and it crucially shapes migrant subjectivities (cf. Conradson and McKay, 2007). The second is her meta-concept of relational space (2005). Massey argued against the representation of space just as a “surface” of patterns and trajectories. Instead, relational space is filled with histories and

ongoing relations, dividing and connecting people in complex ways. As Massey insisted, “if you really were to take a slice through time it would be full with holes, of disconnections, of tentative half-formed first encounters” (2005, p. 111). The mobile lives of “new” migrants from the post-socialist EU countries collided with deeper, half-formed and ongoing postcolonial histories. They encountered a changing historical dynamic where, in the early postwar years, (Commonwealth) migrants became citizens, whereas from the 1970s on, and even more so since Brexit, (European) citizens were turned into immigrants (Bhambra, 2017, 2018). So, instead of fostering a sense of European belonging, Brexit evoked sentiments of separating “us” and “them” (Anderson, 2013), and of diminishing rights to migrants. The new divisions were mainly forced upon “them” (migrants), yet in a chaotic and changing manner. These included: limitation of rights regarding time spent in the UK, documentation of residence and bills paid, and records of travels made outside the UK’s territory, to name just a few (Home Office, n.d.). One reactive result was that ad hoc hierarchies were created and expressed among EU migrants themselves: some insisted that they are A-rank migrants from “old” EU countries, and somehow superior to the “new” and generalised Eastern Europeans (Lulle, Moroşanu, & King, 2018). Others draw boundaries within national groups, separating “deserving us” from “undeserving them” in terms of class, skills, work-history, law-abidance and other factors.

We use the notion of “boundary drawing” as understood in research into belonging and exclusion (Antonsich, 2010). It also proves to be a particularly useful conceptual tool for analysing migrant subjective experiences and agency; claims of being at home, belonging to a place personally and intimately; and vice-versa, understanding socio-spatial exclusion. Moreover, we combine the notion of boundary drawing with Aure’s (2011) take on borders that “make migrants” and position them in certain power-geometries. In her study of Russian migrants in Norway, a broad spectrum of differentiation comes into play, based on judicial status, gender, level of integration, cultural background and work experience. All these factors place migrants in unequal positions of control and freedom in their movement across borders and their rights in terms of residence permits. When the above-mentioned factors are combined differently, certain socio-spatial positions are regarded as inferior, and ranked by the local population as “not like us – Norwegians”. Aure emphasises that employers, and especially media campaigners who come up with such inferior rankings, have the power to define the position of a migrant in society. However, such definitions do not necessarily dictate the day-to-day experiences of migrants themselves. In other words, if some migrants

(high-skilled, well-off, integrated etc.) are defined as “deserving” in the Brexit context under scrutiny, this does not mean that they themselves internalise the power-geometries imposed upon them. Migrants have and exercise agency in multiple ways even under the conditions of prolonged political uncertainty caused by the Leave vote and its ongoing chaotic political responses. This is precisely why we argue for a deeper and combined understanding of migrant subjectivities along with power-geometries. Additionally, we expand Aure’s theoretical frame by incorporating the time dimension more strongly into the notions of power-geometry and relational space, since time of arrival and the complexity of relations within the UK and across borders differ greatly among “new” migrants from the Baltic region and Central and Eastern Europe (Burrell, 2010).

We also need to say some words regarding the notion of “Eastern Europeans”. Academic, media, and political discourses in the UK tend to group the countries which joined the EU relatively recently under the umbrella of “Eastern Europe” or “Central and Eastern Europe” (CEE). Statistics refer to “A8” – Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, although two other countries – Cyprus and Malta – also joined the EU in 2004.¹ “A2” refers to Bulgaria and Romania; both joined the EU in 2007. A8 and A2 comprise the post-socialist member-countries, which often get equalised with Eastern Europe. Indeed, as Paasi (2010) argues, there exists a multitude of actors who – intentionally or not – participate in the social construction of a region. The UK opted to open its labour market fully to the EU newcomers in 2004 but applied restrictions in 2007 when Bulgaria and Romania joined the European bloc; these restrictions expired in 2014. During the decade prior to the Brexit vote, an invented region – “Eastern Europe” (Wolff, 1994) – and a trope of an archetypal pan-Eastern European migrant were widely diffused by many actors in the UK. Other taxonomies, such as the United Nations’ construction of the three Baltic republics as Northern European countries, while Poland and Slovakia are categorised as Central (and not Eastern) European, have not gained much prominence in UK discourses on the regions where migrants come from. And yet, this anti-immigrant sentiment, especially against the newly arrived, so-called Eastern Europeans, was easily recognised by our participants. Silvey (2004) argues that migrants’ self-conceptions of their possibilities in certain places are forged in conjunction with labour market opportunities, including wage differences and legal status. These power-geometries give rise to migrant subjectivities and also produce specific migration patterns distinguished by different socio-economic realities and by contrasting imaginations of what the future holds.

Prior research on CEE migrants in the UK has revealed how labour market mobilities pull certain groups of these migrants to particular areas (Bauere, Densham, Millar, & Salt, 2007). CEE migrants have been located in almost all parts of the UK. They exhibit a relative concentration in Eastern England and the Midlands, but they are also numerous in absolute terms in London and its surrounds, according to data from the Workers Registration Scheme and the 2011 Census. However, it was also noticeable that they were pronouncedly more concentrated in lower-paid jobs, especially in service sectors, industries and agriculture. CEE migrants were exercising their post-2004 mobility rights but simultaneously their trajectories were diverging between “achieving” EU citizens and disadvantaged labour migrants (Ciupijus, 2011). Many were “living on the move”, thereby posing challenges to social and labour market policies that tend to “fix” people to certain places where they could settle, integrate and potentially stay for good (Shubin and Dickey, 2013).

It is interesting that, also in academic discourses, the CEE region has been set apart, inferring that the “Western” European countries are more mature, developed and “civilised” and that it is the duty of the “old” EU member-states to teach the East-Central European countries to become more advanced, democratic and “fully European”. This broadly orientalist discourse (Kuus, 2004) spills over into the UK debate on Euroscepticism. In one of the first political analyses on Brexit, Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley (2017, p. 9) put forward a hypothesis that “it had to discern clear positive effects of membership either in the UK or in many other EU member states, apart from a handful of former ‘Warsaw Pact’ countries in Central and Eastern Europe”. These authors go on suggest that the adverse effects of Brexit have been exaggerated by the media, financiers and economists. Of course, as time passes the evidence on this becomes more complex as the economic effects fluctuate in contradictory ways – continued GDP growth and rising employment, but falling real incomes due to the weakening of the pound sterling and emerging labour shortages in key sectors such as agriculture and food processing. And there are many other interpretations of Brexit which are much more critical, both of the process and the outcome.² While it is hard to make an informed judgement on such speculations, one is clear from our qualitative take on the Brexit effects: it did have adverse consequences on European migrants, including our participants – those who are usually portrayed as “Eastern Europeans” or coming from the countries behind the former “Iron Curtain”.

After an outline of our methods, we first explore the subjective experiences and reflections brought on by varying juridical statuses, including the length and actually existing

meanings of residence in the UK for “new” EU migrants. Second, we examine personal connections and disruptions. While it might be tempting to attribute changes in ongoing EU mobilities, or petitioning for a “settled” status within a newly-bounded UK territorial space, to Brexit, most of the participants in our research spoke about personal relationality – break-ups, new relationships, changes in their employment – as the more important factors that made them move, stay, or maintain a mobile life, even if these were combined with the uncertainties associated with Brexit. Third, we question how these preceding issues pertinent to migrant subjectivities and power-geometries shape future imaginations and mobility plans.

3. METHODS

Our analysis is based on 35 in-depth interviews with relatively recently arrived migrants from three Central-Eastern European countries (10 Latvians, 14 Poles and 11 Slovaks) in the wider London region, conducted during 2015-2017 as part of the Horizon 2020 YMOBILITY project on intra-EU youth mobilities.³ Interviewees were almost equally divided by gender – 17 men and 18 women; 15 were higher educated, 12 were lower educated, while 8 were students. Ages ranged from 22 to 40 at the time of interview but all participants arrived in the UK when in their 20s or early 30s. Amongst these 35 research participants, 20 were double interviews, carried out both before and after the referendum, when the same respondents were re-interviewed. The first-round interviews lasted for about an hour, and covered broad aspects of life, work, education experiences, belonging, social inclusion, remittances, travelling practices and return migration plans. The repeat interviews focused on experiences after the referendum, including changes in migration plans, sense of belonging and emotional reactions. In addition, 15 new interviews, using the first interview schedule and adding the post-referendum questions, were carried out in early 2017, in the same region and using the same sampling technique. These interviews were added to boost and diversify the overall sample. All interviews were carried out in the participants’ native language and simultaneously transcribed and translated into English for comparative analysis. Interviews were carried out by three authors of this paper who are native speakers of Latvian, Polish and Slovak. Interviews and recordings were subject to informed consent, and all participants’ names have been changed.

Research participants resided in London or its metropolitan area, including several participants in Brighton. In this part of England, for residents and migrants alike, living

expenses and especially accommodation prices are high, which creates a socio-economic context for uncertainties related to income and work. Whilst some of the interviewees, those who were highly educated and able to capitalise on their specialised qualifications (e.g. postgraduate degrees) were successful professionals like their “West” European counterparts, others fell into the trap of dequalification or had lower levels of education anyway, and constituted part of the lower-skilled workforce in London’s “new ethnic and migrant division of labour” (Wills et al., 2010). However, London and Brighton were also areas where there was a majority for “Remain” and therefore the participants may have experienced relatively more positive attitudes than would have been the case in places with a clear majority of the “Leave” vote. Both formally highly educated and lower educated participants were working in diverse occupations ranging from manual, casual work up to managerial positions. Amongst the interviewees were cleaners, shop assistants, builders, office workers, railway staff and teachers. The data we collected provide rich insights into the diversity of pre- and post-referendum experiences and in particular the varied impact of Brexit on those with stable jobs and incomes, on the one hand, and those migrants, on the other, who can barely make ends meet.

4. TIME MATTERS IN POWER-GEOMETRY: RESIDENCE STATUS

Residence status and the possibilities to continue a transnational way of life, travelling back and forth between two or more countries, were among the first questions our participants asked themselves and each other when the referendum drew very close; and even more so, after the vote to Leave. Juridical statuses, including the length and relative permanence of residence in the UK, suddenly became a disruptive border between those who could qualify to stay and those whose socio-spatial position became uncertain.

CEE migrants have experienced “migration regime” changes frequently, and some remember how new restrictions separated them from other migrants and workers who were in the UK for longer. For instance, some of the participants arrived before the A8 countries joined the EU in 2004 and they had experienced irregular status. Furthermore, while the labour market was fully open for countries where our participants came from, they also had to register in the Workers Registration Scheme which existed during 2004–2011 and pay a fee. Queues at Dover border control, at airports and embassies are in their personal memory, or

are memorialised through collective narratives about pre-EU enlargement. Those who have not been in the UK for five years or longer (the threshold for a residence card or “settled status”) put their hope in an individualistic, neoliberal ethos; namely, that the “good” and “law-abiding” would be allowed to stay. Among our participants, there is a general belief that ongoing mobility rights will be less affected for the highly skilled, who work full-time and do not live as casual workers “on the move”. In terms of time and timing, although uncertain, the post-Brexit power-geometries roughly divided EU migrants as follows: less than five years of residence, more than five years of residence, and UK citizens (or dual citizens, as some countries, including Latvia and Poland, permit dual citizenship). These three juridical-temporal divisions are further combined with migrant subjectivities and actual experiences of mobilities: the sense of being a “good person” and therefore hoping that restrictive residence regulations would not affect him or her personally; hastily applying for a residence permit, often co-motivated by fear of repression; along with other factors and subjectivities related to time spent in the UK and the psycho-social sense of where a person belongs, regardless of juridical statuses. We will illustrate these couplings between power-geometry and subjectivities one by one.

Adriana has a secondary education diploma from Slovakia, and she works as a waitress in Brighton. For her, the “Leave” vote was a cause for concern:

I am worried how it would affect me because I have not been here for five years yet. I am hoping that it won't affect me because I've been working the whole time I've been here and I have not been in any trouble. I think it will be the same as before the EU. We will need a work permit and stricter and longer controls at the airports and so on.

Note that her worries about her relatively recent arrival are immediately pacified with a reflection on herself and what she has been doing in the UK. She was working the whole time and this continuous employment provides her with hopeful “proof” that she is a “good migrant” (cf. Findlay et al., 2013) in terms of her uninterrupted employment and law-abiding manner.

Agata comes from Poland and arrived in the UK in 2012. She was interviewed in 2017 when she, purely based on a bureaucratic time-line, could claim five years residence. However, she was also travelling back and forth and preparing for her studies in the UK, earning money in several jobs.

This is the moment which is difficult for us, foreigners, without any...because I don't have any legal document which allows me to stay, I'm here too short time. I'm not eligible to obtain a residence card...I was worried that I may have had problems with my application to the university, that I'd have to pay higher fees. But so far nothing has changed and I hope it will be like that, but I'm aware that it may change in one year time...[Brexit] has an impact on me, because I don't know what will happen, so it's a huge impact I must say. My future here is uncertain.

Krzysztof, a highly-skilled computer programmer, also from Poland, has been living in the UK already for 12 years. He rushed to apply for the permanent residence permit immediately after the "Leave" vote:

To be honest, I did it [applied for the permanent residence card] straight after the referendum outcome. I was frightened that this process can take about six months and they needed to keep my passport or ID card for that time, but I was lucky and after four weeks they send me both, my passport and the residence card.

The division line between "us" – migrants – and "them" – representatives of the British government who decide on juridical status, emerges very clearly in Krzysztof's account. And so does fear, inflicted upon Krzysztof through a complex and unstable atmosphere present in the media and the statements of various politicians.

Yet the division between an atmosphere of fear and the limits of what one can and want to do for security of residence can become blurred. Sometimes agency was enacted tactically: gathering the resources and making steps towards securing the residence documents. Let us consider two further examples. Liene, a casually employed music teacher originally from Latvia, has been living in London for six years:

I got the permanent residence permit right after Brexit, so I feel more or less safe. No, I am not worried. I technically can apply for the citizenship, but I am thinking now whether I will do it. It's huge money!

Marek, a lower-skilled factory worker from Poland, has been living in the UK for the same period of time as Krzysztof, and did the same: submitted an immediate application for the residence card. However, he goes further in his plans:

I have a residence card already, but I'll try to obtain British citizenship, I guess, just for peace of mind [laugh] ... Brexit prompted me ...

Accordingly, obtaining the residence permit in the aftermath of Brexit gave an interim, more or less safer feeling.⁴ However, later on, in mid-2017, a new, “settled” status was announced, requiring residence card holders to jump through another hoop (Home Office, 2017). A further division thus emerges based on how much one wants and can afford to save for the citizenship application, which costs more than £1000.

These changes in juridical requirements added even more uncertainty, diminishing migrants’ spaces of manoeuvre in their respective power-geometries of status and future expectations of where they want to legally belong. Such divisions also emerge within families where different requirements are in place for adults and for children, creating unequal positioning within a family. Consider Michal’s “good will” to stay in the UK as a citizen. He is a highly skilled engineer, divorced with two children. He has been living for 14 years in the UK.

I'm planning to obtain permanent residence, but I don't know, is it worth doing now? Maybe there will be a new legal status for the foreigners, which will be the intermediate step to the citizenship, so it must be declared, because maybe permanent residence, which was sufficient to apply for the 'settled' status, won't be enough to obtain the British citizenship. It's gonna be a new status for foreigners, so we need to wait for that now, unfortunately. But I will try to obtain citizenship, with pleasure, as a way to secure myself [...] I'm doing my best to help my children to obtain British citizenship. There is a fast-track for them, because they were born in the UK.

He has several tactics in mind and in action, including a mortgage in the UK and plans for his children’s judicial status. Accordingly, his agency is enacted as tactical steps, yet taken under overarching uncertainty. Not knowing the “value” of the bureaucratic proof of a permanent residence status and in which specific form it would be required from EU citizens, he reflects

on what he thinks as rationally possible. But once again: migrant agency is constrained through political uncertainties and his potential moves are tactical, rather than the strategic exertion of agency. Niklavs from Latvia is in a rather similar situation: divorced and married again, he lives in London with his Latvia-born wife and UK-born child. He already tried to apply for the citizenship, but:

This sense of helplessness is quite tough. I applied for the citizenship and they asked me for the proof that my English language skills are sufficient. I submitted the test I did during my first year in London, but I got rejected. They said the test was carried out by a testing institution which is not recognised by them [Home Office]. If rejected, you can try again, but it all costs, its big money and all requirements are vague. It is like a lottery, you do not know if you would be rejected. It feels as if they have some indicators to fill; how many of us, in numbers, they have rejected.

In sum: the dividing line between “us” and “them” in migrant subjectivities does not fade away with each next step in juridical status and a corresponding move in power-geometry. “Us” and “them” subjectivities are further formed within conjectures and uncertainties where migrants are in weaker power positions to negotiate their socio-spatial status and mobility plans.

5. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS AND DISRUPTIONS

Meanwhile, personal relationships tie and untie individuals to the UK in even more complicated and capricious ways than the temporalities of the unfolding “migration regime”. This relational space, filled with intimate attachments and break-ups, creates another layer of experiences, reflections and judgements which interweave other factors of positionality in Britain after the Leave vote. Our data reveal that after personal relationships, e.g. with a British citizen, ended, participants stopped having strong emotional ties anchoring them to the UK and forged a self-conception of being “free” to live anywhere. However, such “freedom” is not equally accessible to all. Accordingly, in this sub-section we explore personal connections and disruptions, longer histories of negotiations among families, and consequences of the break-up of personal relationships vis-à-vis ongoing Brexit uncertainties.

Furthermore, personal connections to the UK become more complicated through longer-term plans of trying to establish a career in the UK.

We introduced Niklavs and his struggles of applying for the citizenship in the previous sub-section. Work was not his primary reason for coming to London; his main motivation was to move away from Latvia and a painful experience of divorce:

Why London? It was [long pause]... If I go into personal things, I was married, but had a divorce, so I needed to get away. Completely. It coincided with chaotic times. I got an unpaid leave so I said that I'll go away just for a month. I thought that if I want, I'll just go back. And later I understood that I just don't want to go back. Better to go and don't look back. I stayed in Germany and later I met my future wife. This is how I came to London as she had a job here. That's the story, how I ended up in London. I don't like to look back, I'm always going forward [laughs].

His wife, however, is willing to move back to Latvia, and not only due to Brexit. Their child was born in the UK, and since the child is approaching school age, his wife wants to educate him in Latvia. Niklavs feels torn between what he wants individually – to get British citizenship and stay in the UK – and family considerations. Failure in the citizenship application process may dissuade him from certain plans in the UK, yet moving back to Latvia is not his desire. This case, therefore, reveals how political ‘disruption’ towards EU migrants – the referendum and its aftermath – enters into and partly shapes relational space on an intimate, family scale. However, these are never clear-cut relations where only one factor plays a decisive role.

Another angle is illustrated in an extended excerpt from the second interview with Gabika, from Slovakia. During the first one, before Brexit, she was envisioning her future in the UK. In the second interview the mood changed, but this was not primarily due to Brexit:

I was still in a long-term relationship with a British citizen up until six months before the vote. With the relationship ending, I stopped having emotional ties to the UK and became free to live anywhere. I am a freelancer, so there is nothing to anchor me to the country in terms of work... I had discussed the referendum mainly with my family in Slovakia who were concerned as to what I would do should I have to leave the UK, perhaps hoping for me to come back. I never went into long

discussions since I did not feel I wanted to come up with strategies, to worry, to make plans before I actually knew what was going to happen. I was surprised that my British friends were more shocked and upset than I was [over the referendum result]. In a way it felt nice to see so many of my friends upset after the referendum. Not so much because of their concern for me, but because of their positive attitude to us – people from Eastern Europe. I became more aware, in a positive sense, of my Eastern Europeaness and more proud of it too.

Ewelina, originally from Poland, is a teaching assistant at a school in London. Law-abiding and meticulous with documents (according to her account), in a new relationship, and mother of one child, she is locked into personal relationships and a career trajectory, but is also victim of an atmosphere of “blame” against migrants who receive welfare benefits:

The future is uncertain, because I don't know at this moment what could happen. I got benefits, to some extent, despite the fact that I'm working, I'm receiving some help, because my salary, even though I'm working full-time, despite my work at school, my salary wouldn't allow me to make a living and pay all the bills. So this is my concern, if there still will be benefits for people who stay [...] but I believe that it won't be solved in a senseless way and it won't happen very soon [...] I've always collected payslips, because I think this is required, so I have them. But I don't panic, I'm not trying to do anything desperately, because there is nothing I can do now. I can only comfort myself with the thought that what will happen, will happen. [Besides] I've always been independent, I was only counting on myself through my whole life. But now that situation is also different. At this moment I'm in a different position, I'm in a relationship, so my life is dependent on that relation and how it will develop.

Such uncertainties are easier to overcome for those who are rather well-off and can experiment a bit with life-style and places to live, also thanks to their sought-after skills or those of a partner. Monika, a mother of two originally from Poland, is highly educated but she has been house-wife for the past five years in the UK. Her long narrative extract below recounts her past, current, and possible future mobilities. She is open-minded about the family's future, since her partner works in the high-demand pharmaceutical industry.

I was living for four years in Ireland before, and we decided, my daughter was one year old, that maybe we'd return to Poland, that maybe we can find a way to live in Poland. It was our last try, I can say, because we were trying to come back a few times before. So when we came back from Ireland, we planned to stay in Poland. I knew subconsciously that I wouldn't stand it, but it was a trial. When we decided that it's not for us, that we want a different kind of life, my husband sent his CV to Ireland and to England. And everything happened so quickly – I joined him with the kids a month later. It wasn't planned in any way. I wanted to go back to Ireland, because I enjoyed living there.

Brighton is very safe place compared to the rest of the country, so it's good for now. But how will it look in few years' time... For what England allows and their attitude towards all these things [referring to Brexit and immigration], it could be really hard to live here in few years' time and really dangerous. So maybe I will try to migrate again... I don't know, to the US? I'm not sure, but New Zealand, Australia are the places that I know won't be a problem to move regarding my husband's job; we will be able to migrate there.

Brexit has not changed the sense of esteem she has for her husband and subsequently, their family and life-style. All she says for certain is that the life “back home” in Poland is not for her any more. Such experiences and subjectivities have been already documented (White, 2014; Monika's family is certainly not a rare exception). This family clearly leans towards English-speaking countries world-wide. In the meantime Monika's wider reflections on deteriorating attitudes towards migrants are less related to fear and more to pitying the UK. Her relatively relaxed and detached stance regarding Brexit is clearly related to the skills and wealth of the breadwinner, and not their country of origin.

6. “THE FUTURE IS OPEN”, OR NOT?

For the higher qualified, and for students leaving the UK and returning “home” or moving elsewhere, future mobility decisions are generally relatively easier. This is particularly so if they come from emerging CEE capitals such as Bratislava or Warsaw, and possess

qualifications, for instance in information technologies, that open doors in certain sectors of the economy. For Peter,

The future is open ... [before Brexit] I didn't have a deadline [for leaving the UK]. If going back home ever becomes a necessity because of my circumstances here, then so be it... I am not too worried about my future in Slovakia. Hopefully with my education, my experience and my language skills, I will do just fine – if not better than here actually.

But here comes a paradox with regard to the Brexit migration discourse (“we want the highly-skilled to stay to contribute to the UK economy”) and the subjective power-geometries of EU migrants, where the highly-skilled and economically well-off are those who find it easier to move, whereas it is generally the lesser-skilled who are keener to stay and secure permanent residence. This relationship – that offers of permanent stay are more attractive to the lower-skilled – has been proven quantitatively across ten OECD countries (Czaika & Parsons, 2017). Thus, policy attempts to “bind” people to a place tend to reduce overall human capital stock rather than increase it.

In the meantime, the future remains highly uncertain despite the wish of many participants to ignore uncertainties. McGhee, Moreh, & Vlachantoni (2017) characterise this existential dilemma about the interaction between Brexit-related uncertainties and migrants’ undetermined plans, or their difficulties in strategising their futures as “undeliberate determinacy”. Another way to deal with these uncertainties was to position their mobilities in a broader geopolitical context (like Monika, above), or to think beyond themselves as individual migrants. Several participants were critically reflective on the significance of the label of “Eastern Europe”, not only in the economic terms of migration but also historically and morally, as in the words of Gabika (Slovak participant):

[My national identity] is very important because that's how I introduce myself – that's where I come from. I guess it also comes with some stereotypes about Eastern Europe. But that's who I feel I am. If I didn't have that I would be completely lost [laugh]. At least... I have a Slovak passport [laugh]... But I feel like I am stuck between these two countries and these two cultures. So I am no longer a Slovak, but I am not English either. I guess I am trying to say I have two homes... But on the other

hand... it's just different character traits of the two cultures combined in me – but in such a way that makes me not fit into either of those cultures completely. [...] I have published several articles in the Slovak and international media not directly associated with the “Leave” vote, but rather with the broader situation, of which Brexit is only one manifestation. These aim to highlight the value of Eastern Europeans to international audiences.

There was a noticeable shift in the mood in our repeat interviews. Before the referendum there was more openness to future possibilities that could be imagined, emphasising a cosmopolitan belonging over the national one. After Brexit, participants perceived their nationality as something that cannot be denied or forgotten, and, indeed, in moral terms, should be celebrated. This strengthened sense of national origin and resistance to the growing negative portrayal of “Eastern Europeans” emerges as an additional dimension to what Bhambra (2016) called “the making of migrants instead of citizens” through the Brexit event. While it is too early to predict any deeper spatial impact of Brexit on places where “new” EU migrants are more concentrated, the potential loss of EU Structural Funds for the UK may add additional economic uncertainties for CEE migrants, and indeed for the alienated “native” working classes in these disadvantaged regions, the victims of the Conservative government’s politics of austerity, who were one of the main groups voting for Brexit (Morgan, 2017). In the meantime, the possible combination of blocked migration to Britain and enlarged return flows of CEE migrants may require new employment-related regional policies for areas and countries affected by these “reversed” migration trends (Bachtler & Begg, 2017, 2018; Di Cataldo, 2017).

Like the highly skilled, students also tend to emphasise their own choice, denying much importance for Brexit in their decision-making on future mobilities. This is illustrated first in the words of Martin, a Slovakian student; and second in the quote of aspiring actress Paulina, from Poland, who is intent on doing a Master’s degree.

I had already decided to stay in the UK before the Brexit vote happened. As nothing can be done yet, I can’t say if it will influence my decision. If I would feel that I need to leave the UK for some reason, I would do that with or without Brexit.

If the student loan will be accessible, I could do my Master's here because without a loan I simply cannot do it. Then I will do my Masters somewhere else in the EU, it doesn't matter in which country. Moving to another country could be a great experience actually, and I'm leaning to this second option now.

The biggest challenge is for those employed in lower-skilled jobs in the UK. Their future possibilities are more constrained, both in the narratives of those who have invested much in their lives of the UK, and in the accounts of the less advantaged, who have been out of full-time work during some periods of their stay in the UK, or who have only recently arrived. The power-geometrics created by Brexit, economic forces, and these migrants' own limitations (poor English, few qualifications, or non-recognition of "foreign" diplomas etc.) offer them reduced hope for the future, either in "Brexiting Britain" or in their countries of origin.

Karlis, from Latvia, has a university degree in fine arts and gave his reflections in his pre-Brexit interview. His English was rudimentary when he first arrived in London and he was aiming for any job at the beginning. He secured a contract in a warehouse but due to various problems, he became homeless. For some months he was sleeping rough, using public showers and laundrettes, and going to work every day. The main lesson he shares in his lively quote below is that, subjectively, "Eastern Europeans" can get used to diminished rights and restricted access to social welfare:

I can tell with 99% certainty that for the people who are already in, nothing bad will happen. If you are from Eastern Europe, you are used to changes, to the fact that you cannot influence [politics in the UK]. If you are here already for a year, you may even not know but there have already been changes implemented that affect our lives. We cannot ask for benefits like the British and other Europeans can. An Eastern European can receive unemployment benefit only for three months. If you cannot find a job within three months, you are welcome to leave! But if you live here, pay taxes, study, do a job, nobody will throw you out, because they [UK] need you! If you are unemployed, on the street, homeless, you will be deported anyway. But nobody will deport thousands and millions as it is said in the press. It's bullshit, nonsense. People pay taxes and throwing them out would be the same as putting your hand in your pocket, opening your wallet and throwing away your money. It

will not happen here. They [British] value money a lot, and they value people who make money for them.

The second lesson in Karlis' account is that the tabloid media might spread fear and threats of deportation but the simple economics of migrants' lucrative presence in the UK will win. His narrative is direct and outspoken but also exhibits critical reflexivity (cf. Aure, 2011). Karlis does not position himself as a victim of Brexit or of the harsh conditions he went through in the UK. Instead, he enacts his agency as an individual who is aware of his migrant positioning but who makes sense of politics and utilitarian realities. This economic logic as the strongest guard against expulsions from a "bounded" UK space was internalised by many of the participants, including Lucia below.

Personally I think that the UK is not going to expel us. After all we work here and we meet all our obligations, pay our taxes etc. For the future, I expect that I would have to get a working visa as a Slovak citizen. Brexit would definitely affect my plans if I decide to stay in London for longer. If the living conditions change significantly after Brexit and it will be no longer worth my while to stay here, I think I will seek an alternative country where I would live within the European Union.

Both Karlis and Lucia articulate "tactics of belonging" (working hard, paying taxes, etc.) whilst also, in the case of Lucia, venturing to predict what could happen, emphasising her possible future "rational choice" decision to move out if the economic situation and/or Brexit regulations makes that the logical outcome (Lulle, Moroşanu, & King, 2018). More importantly, she emphasises her EU migrant's agency: if life becomes too difficult, as an EU citizen, she is ready to seek alternatives elsewhere within the space of free mobility.

In sum: the imagined future mobilities of the interviewees are evidently shaped through the intersections of migrant subjectivities and preceding and changing power-geometries: the economically more well-off and high-skilled are less concerned and more open to leave the UK, but they give little recognition to the Brexit outcome in these imaginations. Conversely, for those who are less advantaged socio-economically, the potential impacts of Brexit are more negative and these migrants' future imaginations are tinged with a sense of restricted choices. For all, whether our participants hope to stay in the UK or move out, the UK is increasingly more imagined as a "bounded" territory where the

“meaning” and “atmosphere” surrounding migration have fundamentally changed – from a space of free entry to a possible space of controlled and limited access.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to recent efforts to understand the impact of the EU Referendum on “new” EU migrants, usually portrayed as “Eastern European” migrants. Through operationalising Massey’s (1993, 2005) ideas on power-geometries and relational space, our analysis explored the complex temporalities and socio-spatialities of migrant trajectories which are emerging in the slowly unfolding aftermath of this momentous geopolitical event.

However, when placed in the broader contexts of EU peripheries, semi-peripheries and emerging “growth” regions in the EU on one hand, and mobility restrictions for some and “freedoms” for others on the other hand, we see how inequalities continue to be generated in space and time, and may shape the future life trajectories of CEE migrants currently residing in the UK (Williams, 2009).

Most of the interviewees were the de facto “Euro-generation” (cf. Favell, 2008) – growing up with the reality of peace and democracy in the nearly three decades since the demise of the Iron Curtain, and not what Farage attempted to describe as people from countries which have not yet internalised “our” (i.e. the UK’s semi-colonial) values. Few of our participants had direct political experience of being voiceless in their home countries, and “came of age” when totalitarian regimes were already past.

In terms of timing and power-geometries, in lives and livelihoods which are not yet established, the messages from the UK government regarding the requirements for settled status, in terms of regular income, stable home and address, presenting evidence for any trips outside Great Britain, completely disregard the mobile realities of migrant lives – their “mobile being” (Shubin, 2015). According to the interview evidence, the disadvantaged situation of those who have lived in the UK for less than five years before the referendum date was mitigated by a discursive insistence on being a “good worker” and a law-abiding person who pays their taxes. Applications for residence permits were triggered by fear of expulsions, whereas applying for citizenship was a process which oscillated between a sense of necessity and purely material considerations: the application costs exceed £1000, a real obstacle for those in lower-paid jobs. However, the EU migrants whom we interviewed do not live in constant fear; they do have agency, although constrained by Brexit’s continuing

uncertainties. They speculate, make judgements and assumptions and reflect on the possibilities they have or could create in the future. Importantly, as holders of EU passports, they see their space of mobility as wider than the UK or their country of origin; hence they talk about moving elsewhere within the EU.

In this paper we have sought to add nuance to an understanding of what relational space means for EU migrants in Brexiting UK. Crucially, such space manifests its existence through personal relationships and attachments to the UK. And, conversely, personal break-ups also impact economic realities and future migration considerations. In terms of age and family status, younger migrants, without children, without a permanent job or a settled home, technically can leave the country more easily than older, more established migrants. The participants' personal and professional lives entwine with the political disruption of Brexit in complex ways. Some chose the UK not because of job opportunities but because their partners either lived or wanted to go there and they simply followed. Moreover, personal relationships are dynamic and a break-up with a partner can significantly reshape young people's perspectives of where they belong (or do not have a "stable" or emotionally meaningful attachment any more). Professionally, participants feared that even being a good worker who carefully collects pay slips may not be enough in an atmosphere of victimisation and blaming. Not just migrant teaching assistants like Ewalina, but likewise many British citizens find it hard to make ends meet in London, but the blame vested on benefit-receivers has been strongly coupled with a migrant status. Above all, the participants tend to prioritise their personal mobility histories and future plans, and did not allow Brexit-related events to dictate what they will actually do. As Antonsich (2010, pp. 652–653) has argued, belonging to a place is above all a personal feeling, but it is conditioned by power relations. Brexit is indeed an unprecedented test for transnational connections and disruptions, where several nuances emerged: a heightened sense of being "Eastern European" in the UK and in the world, and yet an intensified need to reflect upon and be proud of one's ethnic and regional origin in the face of negative portrayals by the Brexit-dominated media.

When it comes to future mobility trajectories, the clearest division is based on income and skills: the higher-skilled were more prone to leave because they can afford to do so. Both students and higher-skilled working migrants expressed a desire for more temporary migration, some thought to leave for more welcoming countries in Europe, but others stated their readiness to adjust to the harsher climate surrounding immigrants in the UK.

Finally, and most importantly, our approach to conceptualising and illustrating relational space and power-geometries was through prioritising participants' own voices. Through this we demonstrated how power-geometries are coupled and shaped through migrant subjectivities and migrants' unequal positioning in time and space. The political struggle launched by Brexit to control the freedom of human mobility constitutes an agenda which contradicts the reality and wishes of people in Europe, especially when they are young, to lead mobile relational lives. This raises future research issues on the specific manifestations of British nationalism and intra-EU mobility "values" and how these will unfold in the lives of those who will stay in the UK. Our working response in this paper is as follows: by first listening to people and learning about their entangled personal and professional lives, understanding their actual experiences, we are better equipped to build a future which works not against, but for the people in post-Brexit Britain.

¹ Owing to their status as citizens of the Commonwealth, Cypriots and Maltese living in the UK were allowed to vote in the 2016 Referendum, unlike all other EU migrants, except the Irish who were also allowed.

² See for example Bhambra (2017) and the collection of essays edited by Outhwaite (2017).

⁴ This is in line with survey data collected from 894 Poles living in the UK in the months before the referendum (McGhee, Moreh, Vlachantoni, 2017). The results found that 51% of respondents planned to apply for the permanent residence card if Brexit happened, and 21% would apply for citizenship.

³ YMOBILITY stands for "Youth Mobility: Maximising Opportunities for Individuals, Labour Markets and Regions in Europe", and is a three-year research project involving nine EU countries, coordinated by the University of Rome "La Sapienza".

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